

---

## PERIOD 4: c. 1914 to the Present

**Key Concept 4.1.** Total war and political instability in the first half of the 20th century gave way to a polarized state order during the Cold War and eventually to efforts at transnational union.

European politics and diplomacy in the 20th century were defined by total war and its consequences. World War I destroyed the balance of power, and the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the war, created unstable conditions in which extremist ideologies emerged that challenged liberal democracy and the postwar settlement. In Russia, hardships during World War I gave rise to a revolution in 1917. The newly established, postwar democracies in central and eastern Europe were too weak to provide stability either internally or in the European state system, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The League of Nations, established after the war to employ collective security in the interests of peace, could not manage the international tensions unleashed by World War I. The breakdown of the settlement led to World War II, a conflict even more violent than World War I. During this second great war, the combatants engaged in wholesale destruction of cities, deliberate attacks on civilians, and the systematic destruction of their enemies' industrial complexes. The Nazi government in Germany undertook the annihilation of Jews from the whole continent (the Holocaust), as well as the murder of other targeted groups of Europeans. At the end of the war, the economic and political devastation left a power vacuum that facilitated the Cold War division of Europe.

During the 20th century, European imperialism, power, and sense of superiority reached both its apogee and nadir. In the first half of the century, nations extended their control and influence over most of the non-Western world, often through League of Nations' mandates. The idea of decolonization was born early in the century with the formation of movements seeking rights for indigenous peoples; the material and moral destruction of World War II made the idea a reality. After the war, regions colonized and dominated by European nations moved from resistance to independence at differing rates and with differing consequences. Yet even after decolonization, neocolonial dependency persisted, and millions of people migrated to Europe as its economy recovered from the war. This immigration created large populations of poor and isolated minorities, which occasionally rioted because of discrimination and economic deprivation. As European governments tried to solve these problems, the apparently permanent presence of the immigrants challenged old notions of European identity.

The uneasy alliance between Soviet Russia and the West during World War II gave way after 1945 to a diplomatic, political, and economic confrontation between the democratic, capitalist states of Western Europe allied with the United States and the communist bloc of Eastern Europe dominated by the Soviet Union (also known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR). During the ensuing confrontation between East and West, called the Cold War, relations between the two blocs fluctuated, but one consequence of the conflict was that European nations could not act autonomously in international affairs; the superpowers — the Soviet Union and the United States — controlled international relations in Europe.

**Key Concept 4.2.** The stresses of economic collapse and total war engendered internal conflicts within European states and created conflicting conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the state, as demonstrated in the ideological battle between liberal democracy, communism, and fascism.

During World War I, states increased the degree and scope of their authority over their economies, societies, and cultures. The demands of total war required the centralization of power and the regimentation of the lives of citizens. During the war, governments sought to control information and used propaganda to create stronger emotional ties to the nation and its war effort. Ironically, these measures also produced distrust of traditional authorities. At the end of the war, four empires dissolved — the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires — but the democratic nations that arose in their place lacked a tradition of democratic politics and suffered from weak economies and ethnic tensions. Even before the end of the war, Russia experienced a revolution and civil war that created not only a new state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (also known as the USSR or Soviet Union), but also a new conception of government and socioeconomic order based on communist ideals.

In Italy and Germany, charismatic leaders led fascist movements to power, seizing control of the post-World War I governments. Fascism promised to solve economic problems through state direction, although not ownership, of production. The movements also promised to counteract the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles by rearming the military and by territorial expansion. The efforts of fascist governments to revise the Treaty of Versailles led to the most violent and destructive war in human history (World War II), a conflict between liberal democracies, temporarily allied with communist Russia, and fascist states. When this conflict ended in the total defeat of fascism, Europe was devastated, and liberal, capitalist democracies faced centrally directed, communist states — the only viable alternatives left.

In the post-World War II period, despite the difference of ideologies, states in both the East and West increased their involvement in their citizens' lives through the establishment of welfare programs, the expansion of education, regulation and planning of the economy, and the extension of cultural opportunities to all groups in society.

With the collapse of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the liberal democracies of Western Europe celebrated the triumph of their political and economic systems, and many of the former communist states moved for admission into the European Union and the NATO. By the late 1990s, it became evident that the transition from communism to capitalism and democracy was not as simple as it first appeared to be. The West also experienced difficulties because of economic recession and experimented with hybrid economies that emphasized the social responsibility of the state toward its citizens.



**Key Concept 4.3.** During the 20th century, diverse intellectual and cultural movements questioned the existence of objective knowledge, the ability of reason to arrive at truth, and the role of religion in determining moral standards.

The major trend of 20th-century European thought and culture moved from an optimistic view that modern science and technology could solve the problems of humankind to the formation of eclectic and sometimes skeptical movements that doubted the possibility of objective knowledge and of progress. Existentialism, postmodernism, and renewed religiosity challenged the perceived dogmatism of positivist science. While European society became increasingly secular, religion continued to play a role in the lives of many Europeans. Religious denominations addressed and in some cases incorporated modern ideas, such as the toleration of other religions, as well as scholarship — biblical and scientific — that challenged the veracity of the Bible. The Christian churches made these accommodations as immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, altered the religious landscape, challenging Europe's traditional Judeo-Christian identity.

After World War I, prewar trends in physics, psychology, and medical science accelerated. In physics, new discoveries and theories challenged the certainties of a Newtonian universe by introducing the ideas of relativity and uncertainty. Psychology, which became an independent field of inquiry at the end of the 19th century, demonstrated that much human behavior stemmed from irrational sources. By the mid-20th century, dramatic new medical technologies prolonged life but created new social, moral, and economic problems. During World War II, the potential dangers of scientific and technological achievements were demonstrated by the industrialization of death in the Holocaust and by the vast destruction wrought by the atomic bombs dropped on Japanese cities. It became clear that science could create weapons powerful enough to end civilization.

The art world in the 20th century was defined by experimentation and subjectivity, which asserted the independence of visual arts from realism. Futurism glorified the machine age; Dadaism satirized traditional aesthetics; and Expressionism and Surrealism explored the relationship between art and the emotions or the unconscious. In the interwar period, the slogan "form follows function" expressed a desire by architects to render the space in which we live and work more efficient. Throughout the century, American culture exerted an increasing pull on both elite and popular culture in Europe.



**Key Concept 4.4.** Demographic changes, economic growth, total war, disruptions of traditional social patterns, and competing definitions of freedom and justice altered the experiences of everyday life.

The disruptions of two total wars, the reduction of barriers to migration within Europe because of economic integration, globalization, and the arrival of new permanent residents from outside Europe changed the everyday lives of Europeans in significant ways. For the first time, more people lived in cities than in rural communities. Economic growth — although interrupted by repeated wars and economic crises — generally increased standards of living, leisure time (despite the growing number of two-career families), educational attainment, and participation in mass cultural entertainments. The collapse of the birth rate to below replacement levels enhanced the financial well-being of individual families even as it reduced the labor force. To support labor-force participation and encourage families, governments instituted family policies supporting child care and created large-scale guest-worker programs.

Europe's involvement in an increasingly global economy exposed its citizens to new goods, ideas, and practices. Altogether, the disruptions of war and decolonization led to new demographic patterns — a population increase followed by falling birth rates and the immigration of non-Europeans — and to uncertainties about Europeans' cultural identity. Even before the collapse of communism and continuing afterward, a variety of groups on both the left and right began campaigns of terror in the name of ethnic or national autonomy, or in radical opposition to free-market ideology. Other groups worked within the democratic system to achieve nationalist and xenophobic goals.

By the 1960s, the rapid industrialization of the previous century had created significant environmental problems. Environmentalists argued that the unfettered free-market economy could lead Europe to ecological disaster, and they challenged the traditional economic and political establishment with demands for sustainable development sensitive to environmental, aesthetic, and moral constraints. At the same time, a generation that had not experienced either economic depression or total war came of age and criticized existing institutions and beliefs while calling for greater political and personal freedom. These demands culminated with the 1968 youth revolts in Europe's major cities and in challenges to institutional authority structures, especially those of universities.

Feminist movements gained increased participation for women in politics, and before the end of the century, several women became heads of government or state. Yet traditional social patterns and institutions continued to hinder the achievement of gender equality. While these internal movements and struggles went on, immigrants from around the globe poured into Europe, and by the end of the century, Europeans found themselves living in multiethnic and multireligious communities. Immigrants defied traditional expectations of integration and assimilation and expressed social values different from 20th-century Europeans. Many Europeans refused to consider the newcomers as true members of their society. In the early 21st century, Europeans continued to wrestle with issues of social justice and how to define European identity.